



## **Evanston Full Circle Program: Howard Street Business Inventory**

### **Introduction**

The [City of Evanston's](#) Full Circle project is focused on the Howard Street commercial corridor, which forms the City's southern boundary and is shared with the City of Chicago. This once bustling commercial district is now home to many marginal businesses and uses, persistent vacancies, and several neglected properties with absentee landlords. Area residents believe they would have access to a better mix of goods and services with focused marketing efforts and a strengthened business district. An inventory of the availability and current physical condition of commercial properties would provide a clear picture of the existing business mix, as well as provide a base set of data from which to measure progress through time.

While disinvestment by absentee landlords is a major source of the problem, another may be an unwelcoming pedestrian experience. As Jane Jacobs observed in *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*, city streets need to feel safe in order to be vital and fully functioning. Although Evanston and Chicago jointly undertook a major facelift of Howard Street's hardscape and plantings in 2001, the anticipated boost for the local business climate has not been realized. Thus, the Howard Street Business Inventory will also include a safety audit of the area. A safety audit is a tool that citizens use to evaluate different features in their neighborhood with the goal of reducing crime and improving personal safety. The audit helps people look at a space that feels unsafe and determine why it feels that way. Evanston's audit uses a walkabout checklist that asks participants to rate factors like general impressions, lighting, sightlines, and signage on the street. Comparing the community's impressions to crime statistics will be useful in identifying potentially illegal activity that some of the marginal businesses may be harboring and assessing how current environmental conditions affect the safety and hospitality of the Howard Street corridor.

Evanston's Full Circle project has two goals:

1. To collect and analyze quantitative (business inventory) and qualitative (building condition, perceived safety issues, business owner concerns) data which will assist the city in updating its strategies for improving the business environment in this area.
2. To use the Full Circle technology and mapping capabilities to improve and strengthen citizen participation in the planning process.

## **Project Design and Progress Report**

City staff, 8<sup>th</sup> Ward Alderman Ann Rainey and members of Brummel Park Neighbors have worked in close partnership to develop the scope, work assignments and schedule from the inception of the project. The project began with joint meetings between staff, the alderman and neighborhood representatives to develop two survey instruments:

- 1) Exterior Building Survey [physical condition, safety perception per CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) principles; and
- 2) Survey of Business Owners.

Information gathered through the Building Inventory is intended to describe and map physical conditions along Howard Street related to building exteriors and streetscape. The data gathered are very important because they establish a benchmark from which to measure the efficiency and progress of future planning initiatives on Howard Street. Building inventory information included building condition, lighting, signage, parking, and vacancies.

The business owner surveys were proposed as means to update property owner and merchant contact information and establish communication. It also sought answers to several questions related to the perceived business climate along Howard Street, specifically:

- What are the needs and interests of local business owners and merchants?
- What is good and bad about conducting business on Howard Street?

Both the building inventory and the business owner survey were to be completed by community volunteers and staff, using CMAP's "smart phones". Local volunteers attended one of two training sessions designed to prepare them for their field work. Each training session included an explanation of the two surveys, an introductory course in CPTED principles, and a field exercise in observing and evaluating the physical conditions of properties along Howard Street.

Overall, staff team members were pleased with the response and apparent effectiveness of the training exercise. The project attracted a group of volunteers that is quite diverse (age, race, ethnicity) and included interested Chicago residents. The volunteers were engaged in the process, evidenced by their positive interactions and general concern for the scope of the project and performance outcomes.

Volunteers were eager to offer their perceptions during their safety audit training and made keen observations. The overview of CPTED principles seemed like an appropriate amount of information to convey to the group. The additional field experience, when volunteers went out and evaluated a building, was useful because it helped them recognize what to look for and how they might rate things compared with their fellow members. Although the CPTED training was brief (15 minutes), it appeared during the field exercise that volunteers were able to identify the specific things which triggered their instinctual responses at certain locations and situations and had already begun to see the physical environment differently. Staff believes that volunteers left the training

feeling prepared to take on the building surveys. There seemed to be a bit of reluctance among some to undertake the business surveys, so allowing volunteers to do either or both was seen as a good option.

Because the “smart phones” provided by CMAP were not functional, volunteers completed paper surveys in November and the survey results were entered into CMAP’s data base. However, it was then discovered that a significant number of building safety and condition attributes had been placed in a parcel-based format which would not permit the fine-grained mapping which was originally desired. Since then, City and CMAP staff have been working to break out these attributes and to place them on an address-based format. Once that is rectified, the data will be re-entered and mapping analysis can begin. In addition, the City hopes to analyze other data sets - crime statistics, property standards violations, and business licenses—in conjunction with the building/business inventories. It is expected that this can be completed by mid-March.

City staff hopes to use the Full Circle project as a model for similar planning in west Evanston. There, the Howard Business/Building Inventories may be applied in two small business districts which also were once healthy commercial areas. This effort could also capitalize on the expertise developed by the Brummel Street Neighbors, promoting collaboration and community between the cross-town groups. The dynamic exchange between the members of these groups would also provide fertile ground for additional mentoring opportunities.